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Planning the Unplanned City: The Story of the Gold Coast

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Abstract: One of the distinctive features of Gold Coast urbanisation is its historically ad hoc approach to development with little or no strategic planning to guide it. Many have commented on the lack of planning on the Gold Coast calling it 'an experiment in freedom' or 'free enterprise city'. Following a major restructuring of the Queensland's local councils, the 1990s witnessed a shift from ad hoc decision making to more systematic planning on the Gold Coast.

Understanding the past is important for shaping the future. This paper reviews the history of regulatory planning on the Gold Coast, encompassing decisions affecting the form and development of its earliest settlements through to its periods of greatest construction and most streamlined decision-making. It focuses mainly on past planning processes, the problems identified in each planning exercise and the interventions introduced, asking whether these were implemented or not and why. The paper positions the Gold Coast as a physical embodiment of this history of decision making, assessing the effects on the city as a whole of specific measures either affording freedoms or insisting on accountability to various levels of regulation. It examines how the absence of some planning measures influenced the form of the city and its internal arrangements and considers how the shift from ad hoc decision making towards more systematic planning efforts affected the city's urbanisation. The lessons that the Gold Coast example provides will resonate with places elsewhere in Australia and the world, if not always in scale definitely in substance.

Introduction

Gold Coast's historically ad hoc approach to development with little or no strategic planning to guide it is one of the distinctive features of its urbanisation. Many have commented on the lack of planning on the Gold Coast (Hitch 1959; Pigram 1977; Fitzgerald 1984; Jones 1986; Burchill 2005). Juppenlatz (1959, 51) called it 'an experiment in freedom', for Mullins (1984, 44) and Jones (1986, 62) it is a 'free enterprise', 'free market city' respectively. Fitzgerald (1984, 469) quoted from the *Australian Financial Review* that the Gold Coast 'was borne to pre-eminence in an era devoid of design or planning. Consequently it was destined to be ravaged by inexperienced, selfish and vested interests in their reckless rush to seize their choice of its delightful foreshores'. Why was so little attention paid to planning on the Gold Coast? As early as 1959 Kollar (1959, 58) surmised in a special issue of *Architecture in Australia* dedicated to the Gold Coast the chief cause of short-sighted policy and uncontrolled development to be 'a perpetual fear, year after year, that the boom would suddenly stop: all were eager to make the most of it as long as it lasted'. Not only did growth not abate, but its rate continued to increase to the point where an overall regional plan was already 'becoming more and more a major financial sacrifice' by 1959 (Kollar 1959, 58).

This type of unplanned growth with an ad hoc planning process is typical for resorts that have evolved predominantly since World War Two (Smith 1991). The pro-growth attitude of local and state governments contributed to the minimal government interference. On the Gold Coast this attitude is rooted in developers' historical control over local government, either through direct involvement or a powerful lobby. During this period the role of government was perceived 'as simply aiding private enterprise' (Mullins 1984, 44). The close relationship between government and entrepreneurs, rapid legislative changes that allowed for private development even in flood-prone land and the ability and willingness of developers to take public office all resulted in a pro-growth coalition where the typical opposition of developers and regulators was diluted and the role of the regulators compromised.

Some such as Farwell (1970, 78) who claimed that Surfers Paradise was 'the proof that a whole town can be run up without benefit of planner or design' saw the Gold Coast's lack of planning as its strength. Jones (1986, 62) suggested that having been developed without modern town planning methods might have been the key to the success and vitality of the city. Others pointed to the undesirable consequences of unplanned growth and development from early on. Newell (1959), in particular, noted that erosion had already caused coastal esplanades to disappear, to the extent that they were only visible on maps.

Following a major restructuring of the region's councils, the 1990s witnessed a shift from this ad hoc decision-making to more systematic planning.

This paper reviews the history of regulatory planning on the Gold Coast, encompassing decisions affecting the form and development of its earliest settlements through to its periods of greatest construction and most streamlined decision-making. It mainly focuses on past planning processes, the problems identified in each planning exercise and the interventions suggested, investigating whether these were implemented and questions why if not. The paper positions the Gold Coast as a physical embodiment of this history of decision-making, assessing the effects on the city as a whole of specific measures either affording freedoms or insisting on accountability to various levels of regulation. It examines how the absence of some planning measures influenced the form of the city and its internal arrangements and considers how the shift towards increased planning affected the city's urbanisation.

First planning efforts: Town planning schemes of 1950s and 1960s

The early planning schemes in Queensland were just a series of basic zoning maps with land use tables and by-laws (A. A. Heath & Partners 1970, 119). The first documented plan of the Gold Coast area is the *1953 South Coast Planning Scheme*, which 'acknowledged the impending growth and introduced zoning to allow for multiple unit buildings amongst other uses and indeed introduced height controls throughout those zones to focus development in strategic nodes along the coastal strip' (Allom and Jones 1997, 362). During the 1950s and 1960s, despite a few ineffective attempts to control the negative consequences of unplanned development successive state governments failed to restrict coastal subdivision (Fitzgerald 1984). At the height of canal development and in the wake of the 1954 floods the South Coast Council moved to fix safe flood levels, but not before some estates had already been sold. Until the *Canals Act 1958* neither state nor local governments had power over canal estate developers along the Nerang River. The state government continued to encourage the reclamation of coastal wetlands for urban development with the *Crown Lands Development Act 1959* (Fitzgerald 1984).

The *1959 Merrimac Town Plan* was the first planning scheme for a portion of Albert Shire designated as the 'Canal Lands' along the boundary of the shire with the Town of Gold Coast. The plan contained a series of zones and list of uses that could be carried out with and without special consent of the council for each zone (ASC 1959). The transfer of some land along the boundary from the jurisdiction of Albert Shire to the then South Coast Town Council (which would in 1959 become the Gold Coast City Council) spurred the council to update the 1953 plan, which was last amended in 1955. Like earlier schemes, the *1963 City of Gold Coast Town Planning Scheme* established height controls and identified zones such as residential, light industry, etc. and uses of land allowed in each zone with or without the special consent of council and might be subject to specific conditions (CGC 1963). Special consent required a written application to the Council, however, in the absence of a clear indication of what that special consent and those conditions entailed the plan did little to guide development. Allom and Jones (1997, 362) reported that:

by then, the pressure for tall buildings was such that despite notional height controls, with Council consent, the sky was the limit. There was little cognisance of the fragility of the natural environment or the efficiency of infrastructure.

Early town planning schemes of both Gold Coast and Albert Shire were deemed ineffective in light of the scale of growth that was occurring and the number of development proposals received. None of these plans incorporated population projections and they contained only very crude zoning maps. Furthermore, they had no capacity to cope with large-scale land development proposals. As such, Burchill (2005, 32) opined that 'for much of its life, Gold Coast development happened by the random addition of endless new projects'.

Strategic plans of the late 1960s and 1970s

By the early 1970s, development was booming on the Gold Coast with high-rise apartment buildings and large-scale tourist attractions such as SeaWorld being developed. Parallel to this growth, the late 1960s and early 1970s saw the emergence of the first strategic plans for both the Gold Coast and Albert Shire. As a new concept for Queensland these plans were developed as strategic documents that would support town planning schemes. In essence, they recognised the failure of the previous attempts in dealing with the consequences of rapid urban development.

After the change of local government in 1967 the Gold Coast Council, under the leadership of incoming mayor Bruce Small, commissioned Sydney-based Clarke, Gazzard and Partners to provide advice on strategic 'principles, policies and procedures which could best guide and govern the urban development of the Region in the foreseeable future' (CCGC 1969, 8). The *1969 Gold Coast Urban Region Strategic Plan 1970–1990* and *1969 Town Planning Scheme* were the dual products of this effort. Fitzgerald (1984, 465) described this plan as 'among the first comprehensive attempts of its kind in Queensland'. This strategic plan recognised the explosive nature of urbanisation that occurred on the Gold Coast between 1947 and 1967 and argued that the consequences of unchecked growth were poorly addressed in the previous plan because of inadequate council powers and continuous amendments (CCGC 1969). Criticisms of the previous plan included a failure to provide an acceptable open-space network, careless subdivision of state forests and the Coast's ribbon development. The new plan argued that 'the basic step in city planning and financing must be to bring private land development under a process of comprehensive guidance and control' (CCGC 1969, 8).

The *1969 Strategic Plan* called for comprehensive planning and/or coordinated financing techniques for the city infrastructure including regional networks of roads and open space, and regional systems for water storage, sewerage, flood mitigation and drainage, and airports. Although the need to protect recreational and open spaces within the city was acknowledged as a priority, the plan recognised that the Gold Coast hinterland offered a vast variety of landscapes 'capable of virtually unlimited urban expansion' and that there was 'every opportunity for the continued spread of canal estate development' (CCGC 1969, 12), thus pushing development into the neighbouring Albert Shire. The continuous explosive growth of the city far outstripped the long-term population projections made by the plan. The short-term 1975 projection of 100 000 was quite accurate, but the projected 1983 population of 150 000 was already exceeded by 1981 when population reached 177 264. Similarly, the 1990 projection of 200 000 was surpassed much earlier with population totalling 279 443 by the 1991 census (ABS 2008).

The *1969 Strategic Plan* intended to influence the design and location of buildings over the next 20 years was criticised for being very broad and failing to consider eventual growth of high-rise development (Jones 1986; Moore 2003). As many as 3147 high-rise units were built between 1970 and 1980 and 1311 in 1980 alone (Jones 1986) – some even by Clarke, Gazzard such as its 30-floor Harry Seidler-inspired Focus tower at Surfers Paradise, completed in 1974. By 1982, when the property market slumped, 3633 units were under construction. The overproduction of high-rise units and over-urbanisation threatened the natural qualities that attracted people to the area. One of the purportedly vital principles of regional development recommended in this plan was the protection of waterways like the Nerang River and Currumbin and Tallebudgera Creeks. In blatant contradiction to this, however, the boom in canal development resulted in the removal of estuaries and associated wetlands from public access or control (Fitzgerald 1984).

The planning scheme that was supposed to accompany the *1969 Strategic Plan* was not adopted until four years later. The *1973 Town Planning Scheme for the City of Gold Coast* introduced a 25% maximum site coverage requirement near ocean frontage to protect outlook and open space (CCGC 1973), but once again the trend of high-rise development thwarted these intentions. Fitzgerald (1984, 467) reported that despite overwhelming public disapproval the council could not keep its promises to limit high-rise development, with soaring prices and scarcity of land placing 'constant pressure on council to rezone land for commercial and shopping purposes, and [permitting the] intrusion of multi-storey units into low density residential areas'. During the late 1970s the land boom continued unchecked, and was further fuelled by the lifting of the death duties in 1977. High-rise buildings continued to proliferate, prompting debates within the Council about the need to slow the pace of high-density vertical development leading to the adoption of a moratorium on permits in some beach-front locations in the late 1980s, pending the completion of the next planning scheme (Fitzgerald 1984).

As the area of the City of Gold Coast was mostly limited to the coastal strip then, land was at a premium and residential development took place outside the city's jurisdiction. The Nerang township and its surroundings in adjacent Albert Shire, and in particular the Nerang River floodplains, were perfectly located to accommodate the ever expanding development push from the City of Gold Coast (Dedekorkut-Howes and Bosman 2015). Albert Shire was essentially rural until the 1960s but with the introduction of reticulated water and canal developments in the Broadbeach area, the explosive growth of the Gold Coast spilled over its municipal borders. At that time land development in Albert Shire was controlled by a

Subdivision of Land By-Law gazetted in 1952 as there was no planning scheme (Land Court 1991). Responding to growth, the Shire Council commissioned Brisbane-based consulting firm A. A. Heath & Partners to produce a report in 1970 that served as a foundation for the Albert Shire's planning scheme. The report observed that the lack of a regional plan for Albert Shire and the surrounding local governments was causing several problems including difficulties around population projections and competition between local governments. In addition, it argued that the lag time between the occurrence of development and the (inadequate) financial return to councils was seriously influencing the form of planning proposals. While the legislation did not clearly set out the structure of planning schemes, the standard included clearly defined zones and rigid land-use tables. The report criticised lack of flexibility of Queensland plans in terms of directing development, as well as the difficulty in trying to clearly define all the uses that were likely to occur within the schemes (A. A. Heath & Partners 1970). It suggested leaving most uses to the discretion of council (for instance, by limiting forbidden uses), but with clear goals and standards so as to be able to assess individual applications to achieve greater flexibility. However, recognising the challenges of such flexibility in the first ever town plan the report recommended a more rigid process for the Albert Shire, with some modifications in the table of zones for areas where a greater flexibility was necessary. It also recommended a strategic plan to accompany the town planning scheme to help guide council's decisions.

At this time the northern and southern parts of Albert Shire were in different statistical divisions, with growth pressure exerted on the northern portion by Brisbane and the southern portion by the Gold Coast (A. A. Heath & Partners 1970). Two strategic plans were prepared in parallel for each portion. The *North Albert Shire Strategic Plan* contained only a map and no final report was prepared. Taylor (1973) argued that it departed significantly from the 1970 report with vast additional areas zoned for urban development. The *South Albert Shire Strategic Plan 1972* covered the area from the Albert and Logan Rivers in the north to the New South Wales border in the south and was prepared by Canadian planning consultants Project Planning Associates. The selection of consultants was controversial. The council considered appointing A. A. Heath & Partners, who had prepared the background report for the strategic plan, but opponents thought that the few specialist planners in Australia did not have the vision necessary for the growth and physical design challenges faced by the Gold Coast region (Burchill 2005). While opponents to an Australian firm were appeased by the selection of Project Planning Associates, others were objected to the Canadian firm on the grounds of a conflict of interest generated by its previous work in the shire for large land holders. Council favoured the benefits to be brought by their knowledge of the shire and international experience in fast-growing regions of North America over other concerns.

The *South Albert Shire Strategic Plan* did not target a specific time period but was intended to establish a long-range concept of growth and conservation. It cautioned that if such a 'concept of growth, location and strategy for achieving a desirable environmental quality through control and guidance is not established, the result could be the disorder, monotony and abuse of the land so evident in Florida and California' (ASC 1972a, 12). The plan also emphasised the necessity of coordinated planning, consideration of the area's urban growth on a regional scale and integration of urban service systems by both Albert Shire and City of Gold Coast councils. The major elements of the plan included a new satellite community for ~120 000 people at Ormeau and Pimpama with extensive industrial areas adjacent to the cane fields; a new international airport near this community – situated between the two major urban regions of Brisbane and the Gold Coast (this 'logical' location was first proposed in the *Gold Coast Strategic Plan*); expansion of the inland Pacific Highway to six lanes, connecting the shire to Brisbane and connecting to the Gold Coast Highway at Tugun; a conservation area that would act as a greenbelt and serve as regional open space between greater Brisbane and the Gold Coast/South Albert Shire urban region; major urban expansion adjacent to the Gold Coast communities from Broadbeach down to Burleigh and Currumbin; and lower-density rural residential growth on the urban fringes. It also called for reserving a right-of-way for a rapid transit system along the inland freeway and lamented the loss of the right-of-way of the recently dismantled old railway as 'a pity' in the light of the scale of development that was now occurring (ASC 1972a, 22). The plan summary argued that a transit link to Brisbane was the only way to avoid 'massive duplication of the road system with its detrimental effects on a sensitive environment' (ASC 1972b, 4).

The strategic plan also contained a structure plan depicting proposed major land uses and road network, population allocations and community structure as well as a section on high-density development, based on expected population growth and rise in land prices, as the alternative development, thereby introducing the concept of high-density housing. A major objective stated in the summary of major proposals was to

determine growth projections and population capacities of the major areas identified for urban development. The projections anticipated 300 000 residents by 2000 in the Gold Coast urban area, which included the City of Gold Coast and part of Albert Shire south of Coomera River. While these projections might have seemed quite exaggerated and ambitious at the time, as in the case of the *Gold Coast Strategic Plan* projections, they fell short of the reality as population of the somewhat larger Gold Coast–Tweed region, including northern Albert Shire and Tweed, reached almost 475 000 by 2001 (ABS 2008).

The Albert Shire strategic plans were severely criticised for not practicing what they preached. In a report prepared for Logan and District Council of Progress Associations, chartered town planner Colin Taylor (1973) claimed that these plans violated both the stated intentions and accepted planning principles and practice. He forecast a bleak future of traffic choked roads, fog obscured sun, overcrowded beaches, stinking marshlands and inaccessible National Parks for the shire residents if these plans were implemented. He found the planning process itself to be flawed as well, from the short timeframe set for the task to the lack of data collection such as surveying, growth rates and transportation studies. Taylor agreed with the view conveyed in the South Albert Shire Plan that the shire's planning had to be done in a regional context but noted that within the proposed two-month timeframe to prepare the plan, consultation with neighbouring authorities of Brisbane, Beaudesert and the Gold Coast and state government departments would have been impossible.

Although it claimed otherwise, the plan also failed to provide clear direction for the protection of landscape and natural amenities and conservation of the 'diminishing and irreplaceable resources' of the shire unless they already happened to be in public ownership. Not only were there no provisions to protect farmland, but Taylor (1973, 5–6) argued that 'the plan spells the death of farming throughout Albert Shire' and called it 'a blueprint for urban sprawl'. The so-called greenbelt allowed for 25-acre lots on one side of the highway and areas subject to flooding were zoned for 10-acre subdivisions. Previously granted permits served to justify a strategy of gradual transition from urban to rural that prompted Taylor (1973, 7) to call the plan 'a sell-out to speculators' and to conclude that they would be the only group benefiting from the plan. Taylor (1973) also criticised the lack of planning for infrastructure to support the growth of subdivisions, including roads, water supply, sewerage and garbage disposal and claimed that even an expanded Pacific Highway could not serve as both the thoroughfare to Brisbane and the main service road for an urban corridor of a large population of 360 000. Moreover, the plan made no provision for the railway it promoted.

The resolution to prepare the first planning scheme for Albert Shire was passed in 1964 but the plan was not drafted until 1970, nor approved until 1973 (ASC 1982). The council adopted an *Interim Development By-Law* in 1969 as a holding procedure while the scheme was under preparation. According to some (Taylor 1973; Burchill 2005, 126), this gave council 'unrestricted discretionary means to deal with development applications' and the number of subdivision proposals for housing development on rural lands exploded. A 'single' and 'simply granted' development permit was enough to start selling lots without registration of titles (Burchill 2005, 126). Clearly, this was a big mistake. With the council's 'very liberal' use of its discretionary powers 'to the advantage of developers and speculators' (Taylor 1973, 2) many lots in early stages were sold off the plan into a booming speculator's market without consideration for infrastructure issues such as adequate water supply, sewage disposal or roads (Dedekorkut-Howes and Bosman 2015). Because the shire's planning scheme was under review when these proposals were approved, the state returned the scheme to council for revision to take into account the approvals that had been granted in the interim, recognising that these approvals were substantial departures from the scheme.

The *1973 Town Planning Scheme for the Shire of Albert* introduced action plans or development control plans to control the development of the urban parts of the shire (ASC 1973), but it was put under review after only a year of operation because of the very factors that had seen it returned for revision. The revised 1976 town plan incorporated new zones more aligned with the strategic plan and provided more scope with regards to development control (ASC 1982). Development in Albert Shire only slowed with the 1974 flood, prompting the state government to halt canal development in the Nerang River Valley until the completion of a report commissioned to look at issues associated with development in coastal areas, with a focus on the existing canal estates on the Gold Coast and Sunshine Coast (Burchill 2005). The *1973 Strategic Plan* had alluded to the fact that development in the flood plains would only be possible with expensive flood mitigation measures, but assuming this problem would be overcome the land was designated as urban (ASC 1982).

Despite these strategic plans and town planning schemes, Burchill (2005) argued that the late 1960s and early 1970s were characterised by a lack of effective planning in the Gold Coast region, which could not cope with the development pressures borne either by high-rise development or large-scale subdivision proposals, and concluded that the first strategic plans were tailored to respond to the overwhelming push of new growth and new projects with few planning conventions aiming at limiting development. Taylor (1973, 3) criticised the Albert Shire Council for confusing subdivisional activity with growth and argued that the council offered an incentive for speculation by allowing subdivisions in excess of 'reasonable needs'. The accuracy of the population projections was not yet a problem in 1973, but it certainly became one by the 1990s when the combined population of the Gold Coast and Albert Shire was expected to reach half a million and place immense pressure on existing infrastructure. These projections were a first step towards anticipating rates of growth and change. But each council was still looking after their own interests, with separate goals and responsibilities and the absence of any planning for the region as a whole continued (Burchill 2005) despite both Gold Coast and South Albert Shire strategic plans emphasising the need to coordinate planning at this level.

Integration of the Strategic Plan and the Planning Scheme: The 1980s

Continued growth of Albert Shire, the impact of the 1974 floods and alterations to council boundaries necessitated a review of the *1973 Strategic Plan* and *1976 Town Plan*. At the same time the state amended the *Local Government Act* in 1980 and required the incorporation of strategic plans as part of town planning schemes by 1983 (ASC 1982).

The *1982 Strategic Plan and Town Plan* for Albert Shire retained much of the form of its predecessors, looking at the long-term development of the shire and laying out the preferred future dominant uses for a progressive development of the area. The basic principles of the previous strategic plan were not altered and the review process undertaken by the council staff was described as 'mainly an updating process and refinement of the some of the broad concepts' (ASC 1982, 7). The overall concept of the plan was still one of growth but the flood lines along the Albert and Logan Rivers were redefined and some land that was classified urban in the previous plan was rezoned. The airport proposal was deleted as it became obvious it was not likely to happen and the satellite city of more than 100 000 people was replaced with a rural community of 7000. The Pacific Highway, which was then still four lanes, was once again proposed to be expanded to six lanes; the plan stated that 'road will always be the major transport mode' (ASC 1982, 85). While the idea of a rail system was kept in the plan, once more no provision was made for it besides the suggestion of possible routes.

The 1982 plan would not rely so heavily on those Development Control Plans that once filled the gap between the broad strategic plans and day-to-day zoning maps, as they were perceived to prohibit or discourage development and to be unresponsive to change, especially when prepared too early. The new plan intended to 'allow the development industry to have a major input into the detailed design within the broad framework of the Strategic Plan' (ASC 1982, 8). Rather than directing growth to particular areas, this exercise became one of transferring the actual development into the planning documents post hoc. For instance, the plan report (ASC 1982) cited the need to re-align urban development in some rural zones with the strategic documents as one of the reasons for the need of a review.

The City of Gold Coast prepared a new strategic plan to accompany the new planning scheme as well. The 1981 Gold Coast strategic plan, entitled *Looking to the Future* determined preferred land uses and planning objectives, one of which was the establishment of a rail or rapid transit link between Brisbane and the Gold Coast, necessitating the preservation of a corridor for this purpose. Its preferred route would follow the outskirts of existing urban development and connect Brisbane, Southport and Coolangatta, terminating near the airport at Bilinga. The accompanying *1982 Gold Coast City Council Town Plan* comprised of planning provisions, zoning and height control maps as well as by-laws to implement and administer the scheme (GCCC 1982, 1991). As a response to the growth in high rise buildings in the 1970s and early 1980s, the 1982 plan also introduced a series of design measures on height, site coverage, plot ratio and setbacks to protect views and provide ground level amenities. This was intended to oblige developers to supply more land per high-rise unit and limit building heights along the beachfront. Through the creation of Highway Development Zones and facilitation of commercial infill along the main road network, the plan reinforced the characteristic Gold Coast strip development. The 1982 plan

recognised 'the real future of the city as a tourist and entertainment centre, supported by an infrastructure of residential, business and light industrial activity' (Allom and Jones 1997, 362).

This plan was deemed ineffective because of the wide discretionary powers given to the City Council, making the plan a document of convenience rather than a town planning scheme with provisions to limit or manage development (Jones 1986). When the boom would start again the principles laid out in the plan could be abandoned due to development pressure. Developers registered its flexibility as lowered certainty and predictability.

The 1982 Gold Coast plan was put under review in 1988 to address the continuing growth of the city and revise the planning controls put in place earlier. A 1991 planning study, entitled *People, Places and Planning*, acknowledged the limitations of planning to influence the physical, urban, social and economic factors that have shaped the development of the Gold Coast but recognised the need to manage and guide growth in a planned fashion rather than the laissez-faire approach of the past (GCCC 1991). The report emphasised the need to develop strategies that would address the main development influences identified: the role of the Gold Coast in the Brisbane–Gold Coast metropolitan corridor; its role as a tourist centre; and the need for controlled growth, through urban consolidation for instance, and conservation of open spaces. The report once again acknowledged the need to integrate the future planning for Gold Coast and Albert Shire, and emphasised the need to align basic planning proposals, recognising that major aspects of development in Albert Shire and the Gold Coast affect each other.

Moving to the planned period: The 1990s

The 1990s saw a more proactive City Council adopting and implementing more comprehensive planning schemes and being more assertive in its regulation of development (Burton 2014). The *1994 City of Gold Coast Planning Scheme* (CCGC 1994) was presented as a comprehensive strategic document comprising a structure plan expressing the broad planning philosophy for the future development of the Gold Coast, strategic planning statements comprising the planning goals and objectives, and a strategic planning map showing preferred dominant land-use designations. The plan recognised and sought to promote the different images of the Gold Coast that had emerged over several decades: the City of Leisure, the City of Enterprise, the City of Towers and the City in a Metropolitan Region. The structure plan emphasised the promotion of tourism, with the development of facilities in nodes close to tourist attractions, commercial and retail development, and both public and private transport. It was also concerned with the protection and enhancement of residential amenities for Gold Coast residents, as well as the preservation of regional open spaces. Focusing on maintaining and enhancing the elements that contribute to the image of the city, the plan also adopted urban design guidelines and created Development Control Plans in 14 areas that offered bonuses for developers in exchange for streetscaping and landscaping contributions to public areas (Allom and Jones 1997). This plan recognised high-rise buildings as an icon of symbolic value to the city, but with limited aesthetic controls.

Albert Shire prepared a new strategic plan and planning scheme in 1995 to manage ongoing population growth and development pressures, but in that very year the state government amalgamated Albert Shire and the Gold Coast, partially to resolve water supply rights disputes between the two councils (Burchill 2005). This posed the new problem of how the plans of the two areas might sensibly merged into a new plan.

The 1997 strategic plan, *Building Sustainable Communities*, recognised the strong growth experienced by the Gold Coast but also the need to manage this growth to protect the natural environment and support diverse communities (Griffin 1998). It also acknowledged the city as a 'lifestyle destination' (Allom and Jones 1997, 363). The plan focused on three basic principles: protection of the natural environment; diversity of communities and their social and economic characteristics; and economic development (GCCC 1997a). It presented a departure from the previous documents by emphasising the importance of considering the social, cultural and environmental impacts of any proposed change. It also recognised the importance of social interactions and sensitive and quality urban design (Griffin 1998). The strategic plan and its key themes were supported by the *Gold Coast Urban Heritage and Character Study*, which investigated the characteristics contributing to the Gold Coast's identity and focused on the notion of heritage value for places and objects and the city image and townscape strategy (GCCC 1997b).

Planning the Gold Coast in the new millennium

In recent years, the Gold Coast City Council has come to embrace a process of community-based, long-term and strategic planning, a departure from the early years of informal and reactive planning (Burton 2009). Post-1990 evolution also indicated a departure from a historic reliance on tourism and real estate development and a new attention to knowledge-based and creative activities, such as information technologies and media, that would render the Gold Coast an Innovation City (Wise 2006).

The *2003 Gold Coast Planning Scheme* is the current plan that governs development in the city. It was adopted in August 2003 after what Burchill (2005, 490) called a 'never-ending' consultation period with the community and the state government, replacing the pre-amalgamation individual planning schemes of the Gold Coast and Albert Shire councils. The scheme sought to coordinate and integrate planning dimensions at state, regional and local levels by advancing priority actions and undertaking the relevant lead agency responsibilities for local government contained in the *South East Queensland Regional Framework for Growth Management* through policy and strategy development. It carried forward ecological, economic and social planning concepts from the superseded Albert Shire and Gold Coast planning schemes. It is described as a 'living document' and is periodically reviewed and amended in accordance with relevant state legislation. The latest amendment was in November 2011.

The 2003 scheme aimed to recognise and facilitate the development of 'activity clusters' within the city as major locations for employment, investment and productive activity (GCCC 2011). The objective to implement this policy included supporting and encouraging the co-location and agglomeration of industrial and commercial activity into identifiable precincts. The Pacific Innovation Corridor was a key initiative to facilitate the development of a critical mass of knowledge-related industries in several precincts along the corridor, specialised in such fields as creative industries, education, environment, food, health and medicine, information and communications technology, marine and sport. Some of these precincts were later supported by the state government as in the case of the Gold Coast Health and Knowledge Precinct identified in the *South East Queensland Regional Plan 2009–2031* as a major residential and mixed use development node or the Southport Priority Development Area.

Even while it was in draft form, some expressed concern that this plan was too daunting and that residents needed to be aware that increased densities would be necessary to address the projected population growth (Burchill 2005). It was also criticised for creating uncertainty for developers and property owners by setting up a review process at regular intervals that would ensure longer delays.

After 2004, under the leadership of Mayor Ron Clarke, there was 'a greater degree of commitment to growth management' (Burton 2014, 3240) that was interrupted by the global financial crisis. The latest strategic planning initiative on the Gold Coast called *Bold Future* started in 2007. It involved an extensive program of public participation and community engagement and resulted in a 'high degree of consensus around the key principles to be applied when planning for and managing the future growth of the city' and an overall vision for the future of the city that was 'increasingly green' (Burton 2010, 194). A major review of the *Gold Coast Planning Scheme* was undertaken on the basis of the final report of *Bold Future*, delivered in 2009. With a change of both local and state governments to conservative leadership in 2012 *Bold Future* was put aside in favour of a new planning scheme that scaled down development regulation and streamlined the planning regime.

The draft *City Plan 2015* sets out the council's intention for the future development of the city over the next 20-year horizon with a review occurring every decade and consisting of a strategic framework and priority infrastructure plan, as well as planning scheme components such as planning provisions, codes and zoning information (CGC 2013c). It seeks to advance state and regional strategies, including state planning policies and the *South East Queensland Regional Plan 2009–2031*, by better taking into account the local context. Its strategic intent is to develop the Gold Coast into a 'world class' city and it thereby represents a major shift from development on the fringe to redevelopment of urban centres and major inner-city neighbourhoods, thus protecting the hinterland and foothills. Its key features therefore include removal of building height restrictions in selected areas, promotion of small lot development and replacement of Local Area Plans with zones. These proposed changes are intended to reduce planning red tape and deal with shortage of land for future development. The draft plan designates a hierarchy of centres supporting the network of larger centres with broad, drive-up catchments providing higher order goods and services with a network of neighbourhood centres based on walking catchments. Major

projects like the Southport Central Business District, Commonwealth Games 2018 and light rail network feature prominently. The promotion and facilitation of knowledge, innovation and commercialisation through the Pacific Innovation Corridor of the previous plan has evolved into the city's Research Triangle, including Griffith University and the Gold Coast Health and Knowledge Precinct, Bond University and Varsity Central, and the Southern Cross University/Gold Coast Airport. In addition to the three corners of the research triangle, the plan identifies two more specialist centres: the Southport Entertainment Precinct and the Gold Coast Cultural Precinct at Bundall.

The commencement target for the draft *City Plan 2015* has been extended from January 2015 to 31 May 2015 to provide sufficient time to review the 2400 submissions received during the public consultation period. Among the submissions, Urban Development Institute of Australia (UDIA) (2014) criticised the lack of connection between the strategic framework and the remainder of the document and expressed concern about the over-reliance on residential growth in infill areas around the coastal strip cautioning against the problems this may cause. UDIA found the population and employment projections in the draft plan too low compared to prior projections produced by the state, whereas Gold Coast and Hinterland Environmental Council (GECKO) (2014) argued that the projected gain of 300 000 in population around which the new plan is constructed will only add to infrastructure shortfalls. GECKO further argued that the significant input into the plan's design by the Mayor's Technical Advisory Group favoured the development and construction industries. They also criticised the elimination of details, ostensibly to make the plan easier to understand, arguing that this would open the way to differing interpretations and conflict.

Conclusions

A review of the planning history of the Gold Coast reveals that after the initial laissez-faire development period where there was virtually no planning there were several attempts to control and regulate the development in the city. Several factors, however, hampered their effectiveness. In the early days, the fear that the development boom would suddenly come to an end resulted in virtually uncontrolled development. With continued growth, it became even harder to plan as increasing land values made planning a major financial sacrifice. This situation was aided by the control of local governments by developers, a pro-development state government, corruption in both levels of government and the view that government's role was aiding private enterprise.

When the effects of unplanned rapid development started to be felt, planning entered the picture. Yet growth was just too fast and councils yielded to its pressures. As is typical of fast growing cities, population projections that seemed unrealistically high in planning regularly fell short of the reality of the pace of growth. Most early plans were reactive, reflecting past development rather than providing guidance for the future. From 1960s to the draft *City Plan 2015* participation and influence of development interests in local and state government caused critics to argue that the plans produced only served the development interests. While some plans had admirable aims they failed to translate these into implementable actions and planning provisions. From the late 1960s, the earliest strategic plans pointed to the need to coordinate planning in the region, but with no state guidance piecemeal planning continued until the 1995 amalgamations created the 'super council' and the statutory regional plans started to provide guidance from above.

As governments that view planning and government intervention differently change back and forth, there is no long-term, consistent policy trajectory to deal with the challenges cities face. Progressive planning interventions that may take a long time and a lot of effort before they bear fruit are undone easily in the name of 'cutting red and green tape', 'streamlining the process', 'encouraging development', 'creating jobs' and 'opening cities for business'. In the end, planning on the Gold Coast reflects what is happening in the state, the nation and the increasingly neoliberal world.

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